

Related Events

Panel Discussion

Irving Blum and SoCal Artists

Sunday, October 7, 2007, 2 p.m.

Irving Blum, director of the legendary Ferus Gallery, moderates a conversation with exhibition artists Ed Moses, Larry Bell, and Betye Saar.

Bing Theater

Free; no reservations required.

This program is one in a lecture series made possible in part through the Brotman Foundation Special Exhibitions Lecture Fund.

The Director's Series: Conversations with Michael Govan

James Turrell

Tuesday, October 16, 2007, 7 p.m.

Join LACMA Chief Executive Officer and Wallis Annenberg Director Michael Govan for a conversation with artist James Turrell about Turrell's work and future plans with LACMA.

Bing Theater

Free, but tickets are required (available at the LACMA box office beginning October 1).

Conversations with Artists

Kristen Morgin

Sunday, October 28, 2007, 2 p.m.

Los Angeles artist Kristen Morgin talks with exhibition curator Carol S. Eliel about her own work and inspirations as well as the work of selected SoCal artists.

Brown Auditorium

Free; no reservations required.

Film Screening

The Cool School: How Los Angeles Learned to Love Modern Art

Thursday, November 29, 2007, 7 p.m.

Director Morgan Neville's documentary features interviews with Dennis Hopper,

Frank Gehry, and other artists about the impact of the Ferus Gallery (1958–68).

The film considers, among others, Andy Warhol, Ed Ruscha, Ed Kienholz, Ed Moses, and Robert Irwin. (2007/b&w and color/86 min. Narrated by Jeff Bridges.)

Distributed by Arthouse Films.)

Bing Theater

Free; no reservations required.

Lecture

Hunter Drohojowska-Philp

Nothing to Lose: The Los Angeles Art Scene of the 1960s

Sunday, January 20, 2008, 2 p.m.

Art critic Hunter Drohojowska-Philp will address the personalities and politics of the era, incorporating anecdotes recounted by the artists and those around them.

Brown Auditorium

Free; no reservations required.

Guided Tours

Tuesdays and Saturdays, 2 p.m.

Free; no reservations required.

This exhibition was organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Education programs at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art are supported in part by the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs and the William Randolph Hearst Endowment Fund for Arts Education.



DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS
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Los Angeles County Museum of Art
5905 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, California 90036

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SoCal

Southern
California Art
of the 1960s
and 70s from
LACMA's
Collection

experience art LACMA



The myth of California,

particularly of Southern California, has long loomed large in the modern psyche. Portrayed in the early years of the twentieth century (in everything from paintings and tourism pamphlets to orange-crate labels) as a land of golden sunlight, natural wonders, and agricultural bounty, by midcentury California was understood in more nuanced terms. The 1950s version of the myth had depicted California as a place of endless opportunity and physical perfection, as embodied in the freeway system, Disneyland, and movie stars. This understanding was gradually complicated by the realities of the 1960s, which included a growing air pollution problem and the Watts riots. Images derived from both Southern Californias—the dystopian as well as the utopian—took shape in the vision of artists working here in the 1960s and 70s. These contrasting views emerged in the gritty, even tawdry imagery and materials of assemblage and California pop art, and the elegant, sleek, at times transcendent abstractions of the “light and space” and “finish fetish” artists.

Although assemblage (the use of found objects and other unconventional materials to create three-dimensional works of art) dates back to the 1910s in Europe and the 1930s in California, it exploded in Southern California in the 1950s. Edward Kienholz is considered the leading interpreter of the form. *Back Seat Dodge '38* (1964) epitomizes his use of nontraditional, often grimy materials, as well as his interest in social critique. The artist intended the work to be seen in a dark space illuminated only by the car's headlights, as if the viewer, in the role of quintessential voyeur, were a cop on the night beat unexpectedly coming across teenagers behaving illicitly in a car parked off Mulholland Drive. When *Back Seat Dodge*—once described by a critic as a “jarring combination of innocence and abjection”—was first exhibited at LACMA in 1966, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors threatened to shut down the museum because the piece was “pornographic.” Ultimately, a compromise was achieved: the work was shown with the car's door closed; gallery attendants would open the door upon request, but not if minors were present.

Gordon Wagner, another pioneer of Southern California assemblage, first showed his work in 1956 at Kienholz's Now Gallery in Los Angeles, a precursor to the better-known Ferus Gallery. In its form and materials as well as its title, *Between Heaven and Hell* (1960–65) reveals Wagner's desire to incorporate both the good and the bad in his assemblages. The devotional form of this shrine contrasts with the artist's use of detritus such as rusted metal, old wood, yellowed lace, and limbless dolls. Wagner wrote of his working method, “One of my greatest pleasures was beachcombing. In a gunnysack, I collected unrecognizable objects, polychromed



[painted] wood, ship and boat parts, rusty machinery, all so battered and twisted by the sea that they became new forms.” Wagner also understood the art of assemblage itself to be “a sort of alchemy, a metamorphosis that resurrects the object into a new life.”

More recent iterations of the assemblage tradition, by such artists as Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, and Alexis Smith, speak to its persistent influence on art made in Southern California. As a child, Saar spent summers with her grandmother in Watts, where she observed the construction of Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. She recalls that she was “impressed by the creation of the towering spirals made from discarded objects.” This notion subsequently took root in her own creative process:

My intuition works like radar in accumulating materials for the art I create. The found objects... are then altered, manipulated, and transformed... The recycling of materials... gives my work a sort of power by changing and reinterpreting the previous intention. My artistic incentive is to create an aura of beauty and mystery.



Like the artist herself, who is of mixed African, Irish, and Native American heritage, Saar's *Gris Gris Guardian* (1990–93) refers to a wide variety of cultures, combining a Native American corn doll, Philippine finials, Indian incense, a Mexican *milagro*, and a Balinese pediment. The “gris gris” (literally “gray gray”) of the title refers both to an amulet or incantation traditionally used by black Africans as well as to the vodou concept of gris-gris as magic or a spiritual object. Vodou rituals, though grounded in Haiti, incorporate African traditions and Christian beliefs, emerging—like the color gray and assemblage itself—from a range of sources.

Llyn Foulkes's work also draws from a variety of influences, including antique postcards, black-and-white photographs, and large exhibitions of pop art at the now-defunct Pasadena Art Museum in 1962 and LACMA in 1963. His barren landscapes of the 1960s, however, reject the celebration of consumer culture generally associated with pop art, as well as the boosterism of traditional Southern California plein-air landscapes with their blue skies, colorful flowers, and lush greenery. Foulkes's monochromatic images such as *Blue Landscape* (1963), almost airless and devoid of human presence, evoke a postapocalyptic world. The artist recalls observing the local landscape while hiking in the 1960s, and the elegiac tone of his paintings may have been heightened by his awareness that development already then was encroaching on nature throughout Southern California.

In counterpoint, works by the light and space and finish fetish artists of the 1960s and 70s speak of entirely different worlds. The car and beach cultures here inspired both the look and materials of finish fetish, which—as its name suggests—exalted the sleek, polished, sensuous surfaces of custom cars and surfboards. Artists such as Peter Alexander, Billy Al Bengston, Ron Davis, Craig Kauffman, Ken Price, and Ed Moses cultivated their image as hipsters or, as they called themselves, “studs.” They were often referred to as the Venice Boys, since many of them lived or had studios in Venice Beach, which itself came to symbolize the laid-back beach lifestyle. In works such as *Hatari* and *Tom* (both 1968), Bengston appropriated the painting techniques and polished surfaces used in custom-car shops (these paintings are, in fact, on metal). Although Davis's *Roto* (1968) addresses traditional painterly issues of flatness and illusionism, he employed innovative materials associated with cars and surfboards (including fiberglass) to create a hybrid of painting and object. Reflecting the distinctive energy of Southern California, many of these works also utilize materials developed by the high-tech and aerospace industries that emerged in and around Los Angeles in the 1950s and 60s.

Other artists were likewise intrigued by these new materials and processes yet took them in different directions. These light and space artists, rather than celebrating the high-key color and dynamism of car and beach culture, sought to evoke the immaterial or even the spiritual through their works. Although reliant on rigorous



observation, light and space works seem to dematerialize before our eyes, thus leading us to question exactly what we are (or think we are) seeing.

Early in his career, Robert Irwin—considered one of the leading light and space artists—created extremely reductive paintings such as *Band in Boston* (1962) that challenge the very idea of what a painting is and how it should function: Must a painting allude to something? Must it rely on traditional figure-ground relationships? Irwin followed such works with his so-called dot paintings (1964–66), canvases mounted over convex wood structures and then covered with thousands of small circles of paint. Viewers perceive these paintings not as clusters of individual dots but as almost invisible fields of energy. In the late 1960s, Irwin created his discs, hovering circles of painted metal or acrylic lit so that the discs and the shadows they cast become nearly indistinguishable. Neither paintings nor sculptures, these works are understood simply as perfect, even transcendent, geometries that dissolve into their surroundings.

Drawing again on materials and techniques developed by Southern California high-tech industries, in the early 1970s Irwin created numerous cast- and polished-acrylic columns that seem to capture and reshape light. He soon began to create large installations such as *Soft Wall* (1974), in which the artist seeks to heighten our perceptual awareness of the light and architecture of the space rather than focus



Inside cover: Edward Kienholz, *Back Seat Dodge '38*, 1964. 1938 Dodge, paint, fiberglass and flock, chicken wire, beer bottles, artificial grass, cast plaster, and recorded music and player. 66 x 120 x 156 in. (167.6 x 304.8 x 396.2 cm). Purchased with funds provided by the Art Museum Council Fund, M.81.248a–e. © Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz.

Previous page: Gordon Wagner, *Between Heaven and Hell*, 1960–65. Wood, metal, stones, bones, dolls, fabric, and oil paint. 73 x 23 x 10 in. (185.4 x 58.4 x 25.4 cm). Gift of Virginia Wagner, AC1992.117.1.1–5. © Estate of Gordon Wagner.

This page, clockwise from top left: Betye Saar, *Gris Gris Guardian*, 1990–93. Wood, wire, glass, candles, braided rope, stones, nails, oil paint, feathers, beads, steel, bronze, corn husks, and petrified wood. 28 x 11 x 7 1/2 in. (71.1 x 27.9 x 19.1 cm). Purchased with funds provided by the Richard Florsheim Art Fund and the Modern and Contemporary Art Council, AC1996.162.1. © Betye Saar.

Lynn Foulkes, *Blue Landscape*, 1963. Oil on canvas. 60 1/2 x 63 1/2 in. (152.6 x 160.3 cm). Gift of Betty Asher through the Modern and Contemporary Art Council, M.76.150. © Lynn Foulkes.

Ron Davis, *Roto*, 1968. Polyester resin and fiberglass. 62 x 136 in. (157.5 x 345.4 cm). Contemporary Art Council Fund, M.69.8. © Ron Davis.

Robert Irwin, *Untitled*, 1968. Painted metal and metal cylinder mount. Diameter: 60 in. (152.4 cm). Contemporary Art Council Fund, M.68.34. © 2007 Robert Irwin/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

Larry Bell, *Cube*, 1966. Vacuum-coated glass. 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 12 1/2 in. (30.8 x 30.8 x 30.8 cm). Gift of the Frederick R. Weisman Company, M.82.112.2. © Larry Bell.

Billy Ai Bengston, *Hatari*, 1968. Polyester resin and lacquer on aluminum. 87 x 77 in. (221 x 195.6 cm). Gift of the Kleiner Foundation, M.73.38.2. © Billy Ai Bengston.

All works collection Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

our attention on the translucent scrim itself. Irwin has described his general artistic ambition as wanting “to make you a little more aware than you were the day before of how beautiful the world is.”

Larry Bell acknowledges Irwin as an important teacher and mentor, with whom he shares an interest in perception. After early experiments with shaped canvases such as *Old Cotton Fields Back Home* (1962), Bell began to create spatial and perceptual ambiguities by incorporating clear and mirrored glass into his paintings, including *Magic Boxes* (1964). The artist explains, “I painted . . . on shaped canvases and pretty soon I realized that I was doing illustrations of volumes. I decided to stop painting illustrations of volumes and go ahead and make the volumes themselves. That was the point at which I became a sculptor.” Bell’s best-known works are his vacuum-coated glass cubes, which rely on techniques developed by the aerospace industry. These iridescent geometries—extravagantly beautiful and illusionistically complex—are very different from the contemporaneous, forthright, literal works by East Coast minimalists, who often used industrial materials such as plywood or concrete to create their geometric forms.

Other light and space artists, including James Turrell and Doug Wheeler, created experiential environments in which light takes on a three-dimensional yet ethereal quality. Turrell, along with Irwin, had studied perceptual phenomena in collaboration with employees of the aerospace industry and drew on technological advances such as quartz-halogen and xenon projectors in his work. *Afrum* (1966) is one of Turrell’s cross-corner projection pieces. As the artist explains:

[It is] essentially a rectangle projected across a corner in such a way that from a distance there appeared to be a cube floating off the floor, yet in some manner attached to the corner of the space. From a distance this shape had solidity, but appeared to be literally composed of light. Still at a distance, but moving to the side, one could further substantiate this impression because the cube seemed to reveal itself in perspective. Advancing toward the image, [it] would eventually dissolve to the point where you saw not the object in space, but the actual light on the wall.

In Turrell’s work, both light and space are simultaneously material and immaterial, real and illusory.

While much of the work produced in Southern California during the 1960s and 70s was previously considered regional, in recent years—as the place and role of Los Angeles in the global art world have risen in estimation—it has gained international stature. Because LACMA in the 1960s and 70s made a particular effort, which continues today, to acquire the work of Southern California artists, the museum’s holdings of this art are among the world’s richest.

—Carol S. Eliel, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art

